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THE USE OF THE OMEN IN PLAUTUS AND TERENCE

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We shall consider the omen only in that sense of the term which the Roman regarded as its literal meaning. The early form of the word is attested by Varro to have been *osmen*, which he derives from *os*, *oris*, "the mouth." (See Varro *L.L.* vi. 76—*omen quod ex ore primum elatum est, osmen dictum*, and vii. 97—*osmen, e quo s extritum*.) Festus, 195, agrees with this etymology and explains the term thus: *quod fit ore augurium, quod non avibus aliove modo fit*. To the Roman etymologist the word signified simply an augury from that which was spoken. Such is the usage also of the classical writers, e.g., Livy *Praef.*; Quintilian v. 7, 35; Horace *Odes*, iv. 5, 13; Vergil *Aen.* ii. 190; etc.

The Roman *omen* thus corresponds to the Greek *κληδών* or *φήμη*, the augural function of which was known even in the Homeric times. Thus in σ, 117, the *κληδών* is the auspicious words spoken by the suitors in vss. 112–16. Again in Τ 100 ff., Odysseus prays for a *φήμη* from men or a *τέρας* from Zeus. Zeus thunders and a woman grinding at a mill utters the *φήμη* (vss. 112–19), whereupon the hero rejoices in the *κληδών* (vs. 120) and the thunder. The identity of the *κληδών* and the *φήμη* is established also from Sophocles' *Elect.* 1109 f. and from Herodotus, v. 72.

Pausanias (ix. 11. 7) tells us of the oracle of the *κληδόνες* at Smyrna, and also (vii. 22. 2 f.) of that of Hermes Agoraios at Pharai in Achaia. Those that consulted the latter put their questions to the god and then left the temple with their fingers in their ears. At a certain distance from the shrine they removed these, and the first words they chanced to hear were the reply of the oracle.

We may further identify the popular belief in the *omen* and the *κληδών* with that of the Hebrew in what he so picturesquely termed *Bat Kol*, "the daughter of the voice." Farrar has described this

as "the mysterious power of words to work their own fulfilment as one of the laws of destiny."

We may, then, describe the omen as a "prophecy in miniature." An examination of our collection enables us to make a threefold division.

The majority of the omens in Plautus belong to that class which we may term *tychaic*. These are essentially accidental, fortuitous in nature. They are spoken by chance, without augural intent. One of the finest examples in Latin literature is that in the *Confessiones* of Augustine (viii. 11, 29), in which he tells how after the preaching of Ambrose and the study of Paul had opened his mind to higher thoughts and quickened his seared conscience he chanced to hear an artless child singing the refrain "*Tolle, lege; tolle, lege,*" and how this prompted him to take up the Book and read. He became a new man in consequence of the omen.

An illustrative example is found in *Amph.* 718-22:

SO. Amphitruo speraui ego istam tibi parturam filium
Verum non est puero grauida. AM. Quid igitur?
SO. Insania.

Whereupon Alcumena interrupts:

Equidem sana sum et deos quaeso, ut salua pariam filium:
Verum tu malum magnum habebis, si hic suom officium facit:
Ob istuc omen, ominator, capies quod te condecet.

The instance is interesting and instructive. Consider the personality, the physical condition, and the intense earnestness of Alcumena. She is quick to detect the evil omen that lies in the coarse jest of the unwitting Sosia and straightway strives to avert it by prayer to the gods for that against which the omen was directed and by threatening the *ominator*. The design of the latter act was doubtless to bring the will of him that had uttered the ominous words into harmony and participation with her own in imploring the gods to inhibit the power of the words from working their fulfilment.

Similar is the *omen* of *Most.* 464. Tranio has asked his master whether he has touched the doors of the haunted house. Theopropides asks in reply how he could have knocked without touching

them. Then Tranio says: *Occidisti hercle omnis tuos*—an omen surely ominous enough to warrant his master's imprecation:

Di te deaque omnis faxint cum istoc omine.

The averting prayer is here blended with the imprecation and formally lost in it.

As the familiar story of Romulus and Remus shows that an *auspicium* can be made void by a later and superior one, so *Cas.* 410 f. shows that the same is true of an omen.

Cur omen mihi

Vituperat?

So asks Olympio, who had slapped Chalinus in the face and sought to justify the act by saying

Quia Iuppiter iussit meus.

Chalinus had returned the compliment with his fists with overwhelming effect,

Quia iussit haec Iuno mea.

He thus vitiated the omen by his superior fisticuffs but also formally by naming a more powerful backer. Lysidamus and Cleostrata, his wife, are the *Iuppiter* and *Iuno* in question, and the hen-pecked husband laments that his house will continue a gynecocracy as long as he lives.

Besides the method of averting an omen by an appeal to a higher power to inhibit the self-fulfilling power of the ominous words, the omen may be diverted to another.

In *Merc.* 135, as Acanthio runs up in haste, Charinus, his master, asks *Quod est negoti?* Acanthio replies: *Periimus*. Charinus would divert the evil omen, in part at least, to others:

Principium inimicis dato.

In *Asin.* 38, we have another method of averting or diverting an omen. Libanus, alarmed at his master's mention of the mill, a frequent punishment for refractory slaves, entreats him thus:

Teque obsecro hercle, ut quae locutu's despuas.

This is not the place to consider the supposed potency of human spittle in European folklore, but we may cite as an apposite parallel to this passage the words of Seneca (*Cons. ad Marciam*

ix. 4): *Quis non, si admoneatur, ut cogitet (sc. de exilio, egestate, luctu), tanquam dirum omen respuat et in capita inimicorum abire illa iubeat?* This diversion of the omen to one's enemies may be implied in the entreaty of Libanus. If human spittle is potent enough, as may be inferred from *Capt.* 553, to overcome the malign power of epilepsy, it would not seem irrational to suppose it could overcome and inhibit also the malign power in words of evil omen.

It was so easy unwittingly to speak words that might appear ominous to another that it is not surprising that in some instances a mere injunction, more or less earnest yet more or less conventional also, to speak words of happier import should be deemed sufficient. So in *Asin.* 745 Argyrippus exclaims *Benedicite!* to Leonida and Libanus, the former of whom has just said:

De argento si mater tua sciat, ut sit factum.

Similarly in *Aul.* 787, when Euclio mentions his ill luck, Lyconides replies: *Bono animo's, benedice.* So in *Cas.* 346, when Olympio asks: *Quid si sors aliter quam uoles euenerit?* Lysidamus replies: *Benedice: dis sum fretus, deos sperabimus.* In *Rud.* 337, we have another instance. In reply to Trachalio's greeting, *Salue, Ampelisca: Quid agis tu?* she says, *Aetatem haud malam male.* Thereupon he bids her *Melius ominare.*

In *Merc.* 881, Charinus, setting forth from home and country, considers the mention of black clouds, storm-troubled waves, etc., by Eutychus as an omen which it would be impious for him to disregard. He shows us another way to inhibit the power of ominous words, as he changes his plan and pursues another course favored by wind, wave, and sky.

Of all the omens in Plautus the one that would make the strongest appeal to his audience with its love of ribald jest and fescennine fun, is that in *Merc.* 272 ff. It is a good specimen of its kind, but happily, the vulgar *αὐθεκαστότης* of that age is not reproducible in the best literature of the present.

The tychaic omen is not always an augury of ill in Plautus. In *Epid.* 396, Periphanes asks, *Quid fit?* Apoecides replies, *Di deaeque te adiuvant.* The former exclaims, *Omen placet,* and the latter remarks:

Quin omni omnis suppetunt res prosperae.

After Chalinus in the *Casina* has lost at the lots he overhears the plans of Olympio and Lysidamus and, seeing his chance to wrest victory from defeat, exclaims in glee (vss. 509 f.):

Nostra omnis lis est: pulcre praeuortar uiros.
Nostro omine it dies: iam uicti uicimus.

Though the figure here was probably suggested by the imperial *auspices*, the word *omen* was justified as the augury was drawn from that which had been said and heard.

A second class of omens consists of those that we may call *onomastic*, as they are derived from proper names. In these the fortuitous element may or may not be present. Among all branches of the Indo-European folk many names of good omen have been given to children in the fond hope that these names might somehow have the power of working out their fulfilment, that they might prove to be prophecies in miniature of the later fortune or character of the bearer. Ausonius has expressed the notion in one of his *Epigrams* (41, Peiper):

Nam diuinare est, nomen componere, quod sit
Fortunae et morum, uel necis indicium.

A popular proverb expresses it more concisely—

Bonum nomen, bonum omen.

The weight attached to such names is attested by Cicero (*De div.* i. 45, 102) as follows:

In lustranda colonia ab eo, qui eam deduceret, et cum imperator exercitum, censor populum lustraret, bonis nominibus qui hostias ducerent eligeantur. Quod idem in dilectu consules observant, ut primus miles fiat bono nomine.

Cicero has given us the two best-known instances of the onomastic omen in Latin literature. One¹ tells how Paullus drew from the words *Persa periiit*, spoken by his little daughter with reference to her pet puppy, a happy omen of his victory at Pydna and the early death of King Perseus.

The other² tells of the huckster crying his figs imported from the Carian town Caunus as M. Crassus was embarking his army at Brundisium. The cry *Cauneas!* was interpreted by the super-

¹ *De div.* i. 46, 103.

² *Ibid.*, ii. 40, 84; cf. Plin. *N.H.* xv. 19, 21, 83.

stitious as *Cave ne eas!* and the disastrous result of the expedition confirmed them in their interpretation.

Plautus gives us a good example of the onomastic omen in *Bacch.* 283 ff.:

Adeon me fuisse fungum ut qui illi crederem,
Quom me ipsum nomen eius Archidemides
Clamaret dempturum esse, siquid crederem?

Nicobulus now interprets the name Archidemides, then pronounced at Rome *Arkidemides*, as signifying "one that embezzles (*demere*) from the money-box (*arca*)," a name that should have been ominous enough to deter him from intrusting his gold to the man that bore it. He reminds us of Scipio's reproach (*vid.* Liv. xxviii. 28) of his soldiers for having followed a *dux abominandi nominis*, Atrius Umber, whose name De Quincey cleverly characterized as "a pleonasm of darkness."

Another good example is found in *Pers.* 623 ff. Here Saturio's daughter, now a pretended Arabian captive, is offered for sale to the greedy *leno* Dordalio. He inquires, *Quid nomen tibist?* She replies, *Lucridei nomen in patria fuit.* Thereupon Toxilus, who is egging on the prospective purchaser, remarks:

Nomen atque omen quantivis iamst preti: quin tu hanc emis?

These two passages show us something also of the skill and mastery of detail that Plautus sometimes displays in adapting his Greek originals to a Roman audience. Of course, neither of the names Archidemides or Loucridis¹ would convey to a Greek aught of the notion that the paronomasia of Plautus makes it convey to a Roman. Hence it is clearly demonstrable that the omen is an independent addition in each instance to his sources.

The Greeks, too, were fond of finding such hidden omens in proper names. A familiar instance is that in Aeschylus (*Agam.* 681 ff.) where the chorus wonders who with such aptness, with such prescience of the doom, gave name to Helen, who has proved *ἐλέναυς*, *ἔλανδρος*, *ἐλέπτολις*, which Browning renders "Ship's hell, Man's hell, City's hell."

In our next two omens in Plautus it is clear that each was a

¹ The name in the Greek original was undoubtedly *Λοκριδῖς* or its dialectic variant *Λουκριδῖς*, "a Locrian woman."

part of the Greek original, as neither would have any point in Latin. One of these is in *Pseud.* 712:

PS. Quis istic est? CA. Charinus. PS. Euge, iam χάριν τούτῳ ποιῶ.

The trickster that gave his name to the play draws a happy omen from the name of Charinus. It is augural of the gratitude (χάρις) that that one will owe him for the furtherance of his schemes. Here the Greek original defied translation into Latin.

Another instance is to be found in *Asin.* 374, where it is loosely termed an *auspicium*. The plan has been adopted that a slave, Leonida, shall personate Saurea, the major-domo, to whom the money for the asses is to be paid. Leonida admonishes Libanus, his fellow-slave and principal in the plot, not to be offended if, while acting the part of Saurea, he should slap him in the face. Libanus has no relish for such treatment and replies:

Herde uero tu cauebis ne me attingas, si sapis,
Ne hodie malo cum auspicio nomen commutaueris.

What can there be of ominous import in assuming the name Saurea? The only suggestion in the commentators is that made by Colerus in the sixteenth century, that Saurea suggests *Taurea*, a lash of rawhide. This has been discarded for more than three centuries, as the edition of Gronovius was the last to indorse it. The present writer, in a note in *Classical Philology*, V, 503 ff., has contended that this omen was in the Greek original, the *Onagos* of Demophilus, where Saurea would at once suggest *σαύρα*, "lizard." He has shown that all the lizards of Greece are marked with stripes or spots upon back or sides, or both. Hence the meaning of Libanus is: "Take care not to touch me, lest I make a real saurian of you with the stripes, or spots, I'll give you." He will make him as striped or spotted as a lizard. The paronomastic omen could no more be translated into Latin than could that from the name of Charinus in the *Pseudolus* above. An apposite analogue is found in Herondas iii. 89,

ἀλλ' ἐστὶν ὕδρης ποικιλώτερος πολλῶ,

describing the laggard schoolboy after the teacher's floggings.

The third class of omens consists of those that we may call *prophylactic*, as they are spoken to anticipate and forestall possible

evil tychaic omens. This class consists mainly of more or less stereotyped formulas. The *locus classicus* relative to their observance among the Romans is Cicero *De div.* i. 45, 102:

Neque solum deorum voces Pythagorei observitaverunt, sed etiam hominum quae vocant omina. Quae maiores nostri quia valere censebant, idcirco omnibus rebus agendis: "Quod bonum, faustum, felix, fortunatumque esset" praefabantur, rebusque divinis quae publice fierent, ut "faverent linguis" imperabatur inque feriis imperandis ut "litibus et iurgiis se abstinerent."

According to the received traditions such formulas were in official use in the early days of the kingdom, as at the time of the *contio* after the death of Romulus (Livy, i. 17) and at the proclamation of the plan of Tullus of incorporating the people of Alba Longa with that of Rome (*id.*, i, 28).

To this type belongs the housewarming formula found in *Trin.* 40 f., where Callicles takes possession of the house purchased from Lesbonicus:

Vt nobis haec habitatio
Bona fausta felix fortunataque eueniat.

Eunomia in *Aul.* 147, repeats the formula of good omen frequently used in introducing announcements:

Quod tibi sempiternum salutare sit.

Lyconides in the same play, 787-88, presents another introductory formula:

Quae res tibi et gnatae tuae
Bene feliciterque uortat.

In *Poen.* 16, we have a stated, abbreviated form for introducing edicts, etc.:

Bonum factum esse.

Closely akin to such formulaic omens is the use of euphemistic expressions to avoid mention of a word that would suggest an evil omen. Thus, in *Poen.* 1085, Hanno says *siquid me fuat* to avoid the ill-omened mention of death. This recurs again in the form *siquid eo fuerit*, spoken by Callicles in *Trin.* 157. In 291, below, Philto uses the phrase *ad pluris* instead of *ad mortuos*, to avoid the same evil omen. Such euphemisms are common in Indo-European literature from the vedic times to the present day. They are prophylactic omens.

So rich is Plautus in the lore of omens. His extant works may be said, indeed, to be a thesaurus of such lore, containing as they do twenty-three well-defined examples, representative of all classes and some important sub-classes, indicating various ways in which an omen, if evil, might be averted or diverted, and showing how prevalent was the belief in them. They form an interesting and instructive feature in the technique of his plays and contribute not a little to the element of humor in them. Their use is natural and legitimate, without strain or effort, and with such verisimilitude as to enhance their interest and merit. They are found in thirteen of his extant plays. Four plays—*Asinaria*, *Aulularia*, *Casina*, and *Mercator*—contain three each, and two others—*Poenulus* and *Trinummus*—contain two each. He uses the noun *omen* ten times, the verb *ominari* once, and the derivative *ominator* once.

When we turn from this wealth of mention and allusion in Plautus to the plays of Terence we are at once struck with the extreme paucity of examples in the younger poet. It may almost be said that there are no omens in Terence. In the *favete* of *Andr.* 24 we have a reminiscence of the pontifical formula used as a prophylactic omen.

When later in the same play (vs. 200) Simo, after threatening Davos with the cat and then the mill for life, adds:

Ea lege atque ominē, ut, si te inde exemerim, ego pro te molam,

we have the one mention of the word, used rather freely in the sense of "assurance," and the nearest approach to a tychaic omen in his works.

In almost every element of divination and folklore we have noted a similar disproportion of mention and allusion between the two poets. This is but one of numerous indications that in content as in form the language of Plautus is nearer to the life and speech of the common people of that age.